

# Joining Past and Present Self-Stories: The Narrative Complexity of Our Subjectivity

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Résumé de l'article

This paper explores the links between the multilayered and multi-temporal complexities of the author's past and present life stories, using autoethnography as a mode of inquiry to make sense of his subjective understanding of life. As such, it tries to assess the difference between experienced life history (his past experiences) and narrated life story (how he interprets these experiences from his present point of view) in order to show how one's present self-description is determined by one's past experiences. In the process, the paper explores how the author's interest in narrative ideas has roots in the narrative of his own life.

## **OUTSIDE THE BOX**

### **Joining Past and Present Self-Stories: The Narrative Complexity of Our Subjectivity<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper explores the links between the multilayered and multi-temporal complexities of the author's past and present life stories, using autoethnography as a mode of inquiry to make sense of his subjective understanding of life. As such, it tries to assess the difference between experienced life history (his past experiences) and narrated life story (how he interprets these experiences from his present point of view) in order to show how one's present self-description is determined by one's past experiences. In the process, the paper explores how the author's interest in narrative ideas has roots in the narrative of his own life.

#### **Autoethnography as an Instrument of Self-Study: Deconstructing Ourselves**

How we each become interested in narrative research in the first place is a question well worth considering, for the role played by our subjective presence as researchers in what (and how) we research can hardly be ignored. By unraveling the threads of our subjectivity and the ways that it has been shaped, which is what I shall be attempting here, this connection between ourselves as researchers and our own templates for making meaning—our own stories—is brought center-stage. In this respect, I am reminded of Bruner's (1986) call for respecting those modes of thought that go into the construction, not of logical or inductive arguments, but of stories, including the stories that we tell about our lives, that is, our autobiographies. Encouraged by his assertion that narrative

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imitates life; life imitates narrative (Bruner, 1987, pp. 12-13), I shall be engaging in autobiographical reflection on those experiences in my life that have fed the development of my own interest in “narrative thought” (Bruner, 1986).

The idea motivating me to engage in such reflection is that, during our life course, we accumulate diverse biographical experiences into a more or less coherent whole. In what follows, I will elucidate my own such set of diverse experiences, keeping in mind David Carr’s (1986) observation that “events and observations maintain their identity and integrity for us even though they are interrupted and criss-cross one another” (p. 55); they maintain “a distinguishable ‘story-line’” (p. 75).

While many of these experiences are consciously understood by us, many others go unnoticed, un-interpreted, and unexamined and are never revisited, yet they continue to be an integral part of our selves. This maze of experiences, as Kraus (2006) suggests, creates unstable and situated selves that demand their reorganization into a unified whole. Accordingly, what is required is to probe and forge connections among them (Ochs & Capps, 1996) by studying the past and multilayered self from the perspective of the present.

As a child, I was exposed to personalities from many generations (pre-1947 and post-1947 India) who sensitized me to a variety of cultural realities of multiple generations, times, and contexts. For a couple of years, I have been thinking that this variety is what led me to embrace interpretivism as an approach to research, and to appreciate the significance of plurivocal interpretations of social actions on the people being researched. The question I have asked myself is whether, in my academic journey, my departure from a positivistic approach and movement towards interpretivism has been incidental, or whether I was gradually being groomed for it, programmed for it, consciously or unknowingly, since childhood.

To answer this question led me to engage with autoethnography as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000), given that it is “associated with narrative inquiry and autobiography” (Maréchal, 2010, p. 43) and “provokes identification, feelings, emotions, and dialogue” (p. 45). Using this method, I have reflected on my past to explore the layers of “thoughts, feelings, self-consciousness, and introspection” (Ellis, 2004, p 11) associated with the socio-cultural context in which I grew up and by which I have been shaped. In the literature on narrative, scholars like Ross and Wilson (2000) and Schacter and Scarry (2000) suggest that “memories are heavily influenced by our present situation; by various

external sources; and by our interests, wishes and desires” (p. 237). David Carr (1986, 1991), however, disagrees and suggests that, however constructivist these theorists’ formulations may be, they continue to insist on the separability of memory from individuals’ self-concept.

In this paper, I shall build on Carr’s argument (1991) concerning the inseparability of the two and will embark on a journey through memories of my own life. Though most of the people who were a part of my world all through my growing-up years are no longer alive, their presence reverberates through my current interests and perspectives. This sounds clichéd, to be sure, but for me it is true. Even though today, they exist only in the form of stories within *my* story, they defined my world and were instrumental in introducing me to the rule of stories within life in general. In brief, my aim in this paper is to subjectively construct and explore what it was in my environment that made me what I am today. In other words, I will engage in remembering, narrating, and situating my experiences of the past through “hindsight” (Freeman, 2010) from the vantage point of the present because hindsight and retrospection imply a temporal distance, however small, between the narrator and the events narrated. As such, they are a central vehicle both for reflection and for narrative configuration and thus for exploring and understanding human life.

Narratives serve as a storehouse of shared knowledge and beliefs in human societies and as an essential source of cultural learning (Bamberg & Moissinac, 2003; Bruner, 1990; Donald, 1991; Fivush & Haden, 2003). Nelson (2003a), in describing the emergence of a “cultural self” from memory reconstructions of early years, asserts that “this process is slow and massively interactive, eventuating in a culturally saturated concept of self, an autobiographical memory self with a specific self-history and imagined self-future that reflects the values, expectations, and forms of the embedding culture” (p. 4). Narrative thus plays a formative role in the development of the “cultural person” (Nelson, 2003a, 2003b; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Mead (1934), as well as Maines and Ulmer (1993), have also argued that meaning is only generated through interpretation, which often gets accomplished through stories rooted in a particular cultural, historical, institutional, and interactional context (Ewick & Silbey, 1995). In this autoethnographic account, by remembering the events since my childhood, I will endeavour to connect with my own storied past in order to discern the roots of my present day subjective understanding and the templates I have used for making meaning in my life.

### **The Context of My Extended Family in the Early 1970s**

I was born in Allahabad in the north of India in 1971. Allahabad is a small, sleepy, quiet city (it wasn't until 1983 that television arrived) but a very important religious, educational, and spiritual center as well. My father, Sriram Sinha, was a professor of mathematics at the university and my mother, Shanno, a teacher in one of the government teachers' training colleges for women. I had no siblings, so I was very much pampered as a child. Culturally, my parents were rich and educated, they had a legacy, and they were grounded. I remember having a big extended family.

My father came from a feudal landlord family of central India and had four sisters (Gulab, Shyama, Rama, and Radha), the youngest, Radha, his elder by twenty years. My paternal grandfather, Jaigovind, was a zamindar (or landlord) and had also served in her majesty's imperial police force in India in the early 1900s. My mother's family had a legal background. She had nine siblings and was the seventh child of her parents. My maternal grandfather, Amrit, was an attorney for the erstwhile princely states of British India. My father and his nephews (Jagdish, Vinod, Shashi and Mani) and niece (Krishna) were almost all of the same age. There was a strong emotional connection among them. Three out of four of my paternal aunts (Gulab, Shyama, and Rama) were widowed at an early age and after that, along with their children (Jagdish, Shashi, and Mani) they mostly stayed with my parents until the children had grown. My aunts represented the lives and times of British India while my parents and my cousins spent their lives mostly in post-independent India.

This contextual make-up of my family had a lot to do with the stories I was exposed to. "Culture," says Wiest (2013), "influences what we remember, how we remember it, and what significance we assign to it" (p 4). Indeed, my socialization was intimately bound up with the kinds of stories that were being told, and not being told, and with the values I was taught early in life (Harvey, 1996; McAdams, 2001; Ochs & Capps, 1996) through my interactions with my parents and paternal aunts.

### **The Journey, Post-1971: My Formative Years and Beyond**

As a child, when I had barely started speaking, I faintly remember reciting Sanskrit *shlokas* standing beside my father while he drove his car. Sanskrit shlokas are lines of verse based on Indian epics and are treated as

a couplet in classical Sanskrit poetry, predominantly dedicated to Hindu Gods and Goddesses. I was groomed by my father to recite the *shlokas* as he believed that doing so would lead to better pronunciation of words, improved phonetics, expanded vocabulary, and better abstractions. Here one can see the seeds of the “cultural self” (Nelson, 2003a) being sown unknowingly by my father as he, in his own way, was trying to give meaning and shape to my underlying interpretive system. I agree with Bruner’s (1990) assertion that “culture shapes human life and the human mind that gives meaning to actions by imposing the patterns inherent in the culture’s symbolic systems” (p. 34).

Being the only child in the family, I grew up listening to stories. My afternoons and late evenings were almost always reserved for some narration by either my parents or paternal aunts. Since both of my parents were working, I used to spend the afternoons with my paternal aunts listening to stories of pre-Independence ways of living, how relationships with people were less complicated, and how their lives changed after their husbands died. I started developing the sensitivity of appreciating life events and in the words of Atkinson (1995), the “blindness were getting pulled off from my eyes” (p. 5). I vividly remember the nuances and the subtleties in their pain, and the traumas they had to go through in the wake of their individual tragedies. The evenings used to be reserved for stories narrated by my father and mother.

My father was also a scholar of Sanskrit language and in the 1960s used to direct Sanskrit dramas full of symbolic images and universal, timeless themes at the University of Allahabad. In 1983, after a long hiatus, he directed a classic entitled *Mricchakatika* (The Little Clay Cart), a ten-act Sanskrit drama rife with romance, comedy, and intrigue, and featuring a political subplot that detailed the overthrow of the city's despotic ruler by a shepherd. The central story was that of a noble but impoverished young protagonist falling in love with a wealthy courtesan. Despite their mutual affection, however, the couple's lives and love are threatened when a vulgar courtier begins to aggressively pursue the courtesan. I remember my father donning the hat of the director and the *sutradhaar* (storyteller), exemplifying the role of a storyteller who varies the narrative performance according to the setting and the knowledge, familiarity, and social status of the audience (Kraus, 2006; Maines, 1999; Ochs & Capps, 1996). I was unaware at the time what this exposure to such stories was doing to me, but these were the “narrative gift[s]” (Bruner, 2002, p. 85) I was receiving as a child to make sense of the world. In Bruner’s (1990) words, “all cultures have as one of their

most powerful constitutive instruments a folk psychology” acting as a cognitive system “by which people organize their experience in, knowledge about, and transactions with the social world” (p. 35) in narrative form.

My father was also one of the patrons of the All India Music Conferences organized every year in an institution which had a 100-year history for Indian music and performing arts. We regularly attended these conferences and he made it a point to make me understand the stories that were performed and the relationship between their abstract and mundane aspects. He made sure that I understood the nuances of ancient Indian fiction and literature. Here I am reminded of the works of Ewick and Silbey (1995, p. 206) and Orbuch (1997), who have suggested that narratives are social performances which may have constructive, imaginative, and creative potentials labelled in terms of fictional, literary, or everyday discourse (Brockmeier, 2012).

My father realized also the dream of his supervisor, B. N. Prasad, something he had not been able to do in his own life-time, to become one of the founders of a research institute for mathematics in Allahabad. When people asked him about the amount of effort he was putting into his work, he used to smile and say that “I am working in the present for a better tomorrow for the coming generations.” I remember him saying this to others when they asked him why he felt the need to establish an institute while still continuing with his full-time teaching job at the university. He did not take up any particular position when the institute started, but rather managed it until a director was appointed. The director passed away soon after joining, however, and so again my father took over as honorary manager. Making this institute was his dream, and that of his mentor before him, and I could see how this story became so ingrained in him that it became his life, reflecting Bruner’s (1987) assertion that “narrative imitates life; life imitates narrative” (pp. 12–13). This affected me profoundly in my early socialization years, and encouraged me, as Wiest (2013) says, “to adhere to narrative structure in my storytelling” (p. 69).

Life was never the same after my father’s death in 1985. My mother was devastated and my aunts lost hope in life. My mother could not find a reason to live without my father and she struggled for the next 18 years to live because she knew I was alone. Emotionally, the family was wrecked and the major concern for everyone (my mother, my aunts, and my cousins) was to raise me as my father would have desired. For the next several years, I was brought up by my mother and aunts (who by

then were in their late eighties, supported by my cousins), with stories of the family's collective past and stories of my father. In this way, I believe they were applying a "cultural glue," as Bruner (2002, p. 47) calls it, and providing themselves with a set of norms on which they agreed and to which they aspired. In this way, the stories told about my father and about the collective past through this shared narrative pool was a source for their mutual understanding, as well as for helping us understand and accept exceptionality by rendering "deviations from the ordinary in a comprehensible form" (Bruner, 1990, p. 47).

My mother was a courageous lady and she unconditionally supported and protected me during this entire phase until she, too, passed away in 2004, a little less than four months after my marriage to Ruchi. Somewhat like a protagonist in one of my father's plays, when she felt that she had handed over her emotional bastion (i.e., me) to my wife, Ruchi, my better half, and to the able and secure hands of my inlaws Anjana and Rajendra, she decided to leave the world. She never let me feel the loss in her own way but provided the emotional best she could think of to disconnect with old ways of living life and start afresh. I remember, however, that she was not successful in starting afresh. She was never at ease emotionally and always longed for the connection she had shared with my father. She always felt insecure without him and, as a result, her health suffered. By this time, my aunts had passed on and she was bringing me up all alone. She was close to her sisters and used to spend time with them. They supported her emotionally and took care of her, but by then they had their own lives, too.

Throughout everything, the stories of the families' collective past and of my father remained an integral part of our lives, giving the two of us strength and hope, and in the words of Bruner (1990), "the capacity to resolve internal conflicts, renegotiate meanings, and bring narrative coherence" (p. 47). My father's demise, plus these stories, helped me to develop a worldview and a perspective, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of life as a stage on which each of us has a role to play. These stories deeply imprinted my way of thinking, feeling, and looking at life as a coherent whole, with a beginning, middle, and end.

### **From My Past to the Present: Toward Living Narratively**

My doctoral supervisor has been a major force in my life as an academic. It was he who helped me see the link between thinking and experience and it was he who introduced me to narrative as a focus of



inquiry. When I initially embarked on my studies, I could not have imagined the impact that narratives and stories would have on my scholarly life. As I proceeded, though, I was able to establish a connection with narratives and stories from my personal experiences, and to extend them—and rediscover them—academically. Soon after completing my dissertation, I started teaching, but my love affair with stories continued.

For three months during 2014, thanks to a travel grant from the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute, I was based at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative at St. Thomas University, to develop a study in which I listened to the voices of people from culturally diverse marginalized groups who get laid off from their work. Conveniently, this brief stint in Canada provided me with an important opportunity to pause and reflect on the journey, literal and intellectual, that I had traversed in coming from Allahabad, India, thousands of miles away. In the autoethnographic journey I have undertaken in this paper, I have indulged in hindsight and thought about my past and myself in a manner I could not otherwise have done, a process that has allowed me to unearth the templates of subjectivity that have been defined by stories of and about the people in my life. My personal journey and my professional journey alike reflect the culmination (and the beginning) of my tryst with narrative. The seed that was sown in the past—my appreciation for the connection between story and life—has now become integral to my life script.

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